[Johann Schiller]

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STATE Massachusetts

NAME OF WORKER Wade Van Dore

ADDRESS New Marlborough, Massachusetts

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SUBJECT Living Lore

NAME AND ADDRESS OF INFORMANT Johann Schiller

New Marlborough, Massachusetts

Mr. Schiller, of German descent, is about 75 years of age. He is a tall, distinguished looking, vigorous man, still capable of performing a full day's hard physical labor. There is almost a military straightness and trimness in his mein. His white hair is cut short; his complexion is as clear as a schoolboy's. He spent his early years in New York City but now lives with an elderly Yankee farmer on an isolated farm in western Massachusetts, two miles from the nearest neighbor. These two men are almost completely self-sufficient; they do all their own work and raise most of their food. Modernity has scarcely touched them. Their house has not a single modern convenience; they do not own a car. The farm now appears like a high oasis of pasture and hayfield in a desert of woods and brush. Almost every day half-tame deer come to feed on the grass in the fields. Days sometimes pass before a vehicle goes by on the gravel road in front of the house. It is a country of hawks, owls, foxes, and rabbits. “The house and farm buildings are unpainted, and in the summer their weather-worn boards appear almost black in the heavy shade of old maple

trees. There is no litter about. Farming tools, wood-piles, pails and other necessaries are always seen in their given places. These men are as regular in their habits as the seasons which they know so well.

“And how are you today?” asked Mr. Schiller as I walked into his garden where he was picking ripe pole beans from a long straight row of poles. It was about three o'clock on a beautiful October afternoon. The atmosphere was mellow as a ripe pumpkin. No breath of wind stirred a ripe leaf or a blade of grass.

“I've got what might be called autumn-fever. Don't you think that this is about the finest October we've bad for years? It's hard to stay inside on days like this.”

“Yes - isn't it fine; but we deserve it after all the bad weather we had last summer. My garden wasn't half as good as usual. There was much too much rain. Spoiled my cucumbers, squash, onions, half my potatoes - and look at those carrots over there! they seem to have a new disease of some kind. See how rusty the leaves are? I've never seen carrots behave like that before.”

“They do look rather stricken, don't they?” I agreed. “But it looks like you've had a much better garden that most folks. Being up on this hill, at least your stuff wasn't covered by water the way mine was. Many of my squash were floating like toy boats more than once last summer, and only a few of them were fit to eat. I doubt I picked a dozen good cucumbers during the season.”

“That's the way it goes,” returned Mr. Schiller. “If the Devil doesn't get you, the weather does. But at least we can say that the worse the weather is, the more entertaining it is. New 2 Englanders will have their hurricane to talk about for a long spell. How was the wind down your way?”

“Not so bad. Just a few trees blown over - no houses damaged except by water. I suppose you've heard that our town lost nearly all its bridges.”

“No, I didn't hear but I suspected it. I've been so busy this fall with farm work that I haven't got down to the village since the storm. Of course you noticed that the road in front of our house is still closed. Nobody has passed here for several weeks. Several times I've walked down to a neighbor's and picked up my mail, otherwise I guess I'd not even have known about the hurricane.”

“You're really very much out of things, here, aren't you?”

“Yes, we are indeed! Not that it matters much, I suppose. In the summer our nearest neighbors are two miles away, but they might as well be fifty for all the communication we have with them, seeing that they're new summer people and they have no time to bother with the likes of us. Excuse my working like this picking these beans, but I'll be through soon. I'd like to fill this bushel basket before I go to the house.”

“Just keep right on - nothing's more important than beans. What's the matter - don't you like city people any more?”

“It isn't a case of liking or not liking them. You know [hat?] that I came from New York city myself close to fifty years ago. I was only 3 about twenty-five when I left my office position in the phonograph shop, where I became implicated in a big patent fight. The lies and hate that I saw thrown around there made me rather ill, morally ill at least. It was there that I realized a business life was not for me, so I decided to leave big cities behind and spend my remaining years where I'd have more of a chance to keep my self-respect. I came up to this country - to this very farm - and haven't been away from it for more than a few days at a time, since.”

“Well,” I replied, “you certainly have put in a spell here, and I guess you've seen many farming and social changes come during that period! Tell me, do you think people are happier today with all their gadgets and leisure time?”

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Mr. Schiller straightened up to his full six feet and three inches or so of height, and gave me a long, searching look as if to ask, “Do you really want to know what I think?” then volunteered a forceful answer.

“Most people don't really know how to live these days, with all their chances to get enlightenment! Why, even the country people hardly know each other any more! They pass one another in cars as they go back and forth to the movies, but that is about all there is to their social relations, I can remember when a neighbor was really a neighbor - a friend indeed - but those days are gone.

“Of course this section has suffered greatly from emigration. Fifty years ago there were still many farms operating, but now there 4 are not three real ones left in the township. Almost all the old hayfields are grown up to woods or brush. Ours looks like a farm, and we live almost exactly like old-time farmers, but we take little to market except a few eggs, honey, and firewood. Now and then I sell a picture, and occasionally Henry gets a little chair-bottoming to do down in the village. We trade eggs and honey for the few odd supplies we need, but depend almost entirely on our own farm for food. We use all our own milk; every year we can hundreds of jars of vegetables, fruits, and berries; we store cabbages, turnips, carrots - and beans, as you see.”

Mr. Schiller paused for a moment to lean over and give his beans a vigorous shaking so that they would settle down in the basket, then he continued.

“And that's how we manage to get along. We do all our own work. We bother no one and we try to keep other people from bothering us, but don't succeed very well during the blueberry and the hunting seasons. We try to pay our taxes by selling wood, and it's a lucky thing for us that the farm is big with plenty of wood on it.

“Of course very few people would care to live like this nowadays, without having any modern conveniences in the house (as they call them), without a car and without

neighbors. Times often get pretty hard for us, but when we hear about wars in foreign countries, and unemployment and labor troubles in our own, we feel content to hang on as we are. Henry does most of the heavy outside work while I do all the cooking and housework."

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"Don't city people sometimes come and try to buy the farm?" I inquired.

"A few stop every summer and fish a little for it, but finding Henry cool to the idea of selling, they usually don't stay long. City people seem to have the idea that all farmers are aching to sell their farms, and I guess they're rather surprised at Henry's attitude. But most of the people who have stopped recently do not want to buy the whole farm. They want only to buy an acre or so with the privilege of using the other 400 odd acres thrown in! They don't say so, but that's the way I figure it. But of course we will not consider any such arrangement. Such people would pick our berries, trample our grass, damage the woods, and scare the deer away. We'd finally be feeling like trespassers on our own property, I expect.

"I'm not running down city folk, mind you. Once I was a city man myself. I'm just pointing out that the average person, whether of the city or the country, cannot get close to nature! Some sort of a conversion is necessary before that is possible. Did you ever know a farmer who would stop what he was doing to look at a sunset?"

"Yes, I've known one or two who would".

"Then you've traveled further than I have! My own observations have convinced me that rural folk as a whole have no deep feelings for nature. They might have, if they had some...what shall I say...perspective of comparison. That is, I think that we can appreciate one kind of living only after we've experienced a different kind of living.

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“In my own case, for example, I knew exactly what I wanted from nature when I left New York city to live here. Mostly I wanted peace and quiet, honest neighbors, an opportunity to work with the soil, and enough leisure time to paint pictures.

“All those conditions I have had off and on, for fifty years! I'll not go so far as to say that all my dreams have come true, for they have not. Perhaps the important thing is that I've largely learned to hold my dreams, or my desires, in check. Perhaps my gardening has been more successful than my art, yet I'm not unhappy about it. I've made my gardening an art as I've tried to make my living an art. And in my opinion, no one occupation should be held above another. The best of anything is the thing to praise - the best statesman should be honored along with the best horticulturist, musician, painter, author, or general scientist.”

“I think I agree with you there,” I said, “and these days it's hard to excel in anything, competition being what it is. Have you sold any pictures recently? I'd like to see some of your summer's work, if I may.”

“My basket's almost full and we'll go to the studio presently. No, I haven't sold anything lately, and I didn't have time to do much painting this summer - the weather was so frightful. I could hardly keep the weeds down, let me tell you! But the heavy rains were good for my young fruit trees and berry bushes. There! that will be enough bean-picking for today. Let me show you some of my new plantings.”

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Mr. Schiller led me about, pointing out the new fruit trees, berry bushes, and plants which he is experimenting with. It was such a garden as the average native-born farmer would never dream / of planting, for here it was obvious that plain utility had to share the ground with experimentation and the pure delight of gardening. We came to his bee hives and noticed that the insects were still working, though nearly all flowers had been killed by recent frosts.

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“I got badly stung this summer. A loud-talking stranger came in here and got the bees excited. One stung him and he started swinging his arms and running. He created such a commotion that the bees turned on me, too, and I must have got over twenty stings. That's the trouble with these Italian bees - they're great workers but very temperamental. My bees have put up a record amount of honey this year, but I almost doubt it would be worth while trying to sell it, honey is so cheap. Now cane this way, and we'll go into the studio.”

We walked through high, uncut grass which glowed like gold in the mellow light of the falling sun. The whole landscape looked like a great picture of ripeness and tranquillity. Only the sound of our walking and the faint song of a cricket embroidered the quietness; and when we entered the darkening studio situated under great maple trees, brilliant with autumn foliage, it seemed that we had come to the very abode of silence.

This room is high and of good size, but it contains so many accumulated treasures - pictures, old magazines, and trophies picked 8 up in the field, such as hornets’ nests, dried flowers, cat-tails and so forth, that it seems small. Doubtless some of the high hung objects have not been disturbed for many years, and everything breathes out an atmosphere of an era long gone.

On Mr. Schiller's easel was an unfinished canvas of a deer emerging from a deep wood. The animal had been painted with skill, understanding, and beauty, but the very blending of colors somehow suggested the fading lights of age. And as I looked about the room it seemed to me that age, like a grey stain, had touched and tinted everything, all the material objects, every thought and dream of the lonely artist who worked within it. Obviously, bright, shining colors were not for this man.

“It's a nice picture,” I said at last, “and I can see that you haven't been influenced by any of the new schools of art. Don't you like the cubists, the impressionists or the new surrealists?”

The artist was standing slightly behind me, and there was such a long silence after I asked my question that I turned around to look into his face. His reply was written on his features, which had taken on a cold expression of contempt. His lips were firmly compressed together, and with a little embarrassment I realized that I had touched upon a topic of discussion that was taboo so far as he was concerned. So I hurried to change the subject.

“But don't you sometimes long for the companionship of other artists and educated men? Really now, wouldn't you like to live in 9 New York once more and submerge yourself in human activities there? Don't you sometimes think that you have milked this sort of existence dry? Besides, most people have a hankering to return to the scenes of their youth.”

Perhaps it was a good thing that my acquaintance with Mr. Schiller had extended over a period of seven or eight years, for no doubt it seemed to him that my questions were rather personal. However, he took them well, and after gazing for a long moment up through the studio window into the colored leaves of the maple trees, he answered:

“ This is my home, now. It's true that I am getting old and that it is no longer easy to get along here. But at any rate I have something to do - at least I'm functioning like a normal creature of nature. I see enough of people, and I'd rather continue cultivating my garden than to cultivate new friends. Garden crops are more dependable. No, most of my traveling will continue to be done on foot. I still take twenty - mile walks when the farm work is slack, and not only do I enjoy walking just for the sake of walking, but I find my subjects for painting while wandering in abandoned places. See, here's a painting of what is left of an old sawmill I found far back in a thick woods on the banks of Black Brook. I like to remember what other folk forget. People have the mistaken idea that the present is more important than the past, but it isn't, any more than a new gold coin is more valuable than an old one. Values are cumulative. Years are like bricks in the walls of a house that we must live in, and the old 10 bricks serve as well as the new. As much as I understand of it, I like Einstein's theory of relativity; and if Mars is really inhabited by people, I'd be very

interested to know what year it is there. Certainly it would not be nineteen hundred and thirty eight!”

Mr. Schiller paused, and I noticed that the room was rapidly growing darker. It was time for me to leave. I knew that my campanion had his evening chores to do, and I did not want to keep him from them. The sun was just about to go down as I got outside, and I was looking at it when I heard my host exclaim in a low voice: “There they are!”

For an instant I wondered what he meant, but on turning my gaze to the direction in which he was looking, I saw two fine, sunlit deer standing not more than a hundred yards away in the middle of the hayfield in front of the house. For a moment they stood intently looking at us, then they began again to eat the new autumn grass of the field, as if they had as much right to it as the cows of the farm.